

Testimony of the Human Trafficking Prevention Project

BILL NO: House Bill 396
TITLE: Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention
Services Program
COMMITTEE: Finance
HEARING DATE: March 11, 2021
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

House Bill 396 would authorize the establishment of an Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program to provide centers for the safe and sterile consumption of pre-obtained drugs. The centers would also provide sterile needles, administer first aid as needed, and provide access to addiction services. The Human Trafficking Prevention Project at the University of Baltimore School of Law supports this bill because it will reduce the risk of overdose, incarceration, *and* re-exploitation for trafficking survivors, many of whom are using drugs to cope with the trauma of their trafficking experience. It will also reduce the risk that people who consume drugs, a population already at heightened risk for an innumerable number of predatory abuses, are trafficked as a direct result of their addiction.

The opioid epidemic has had a substantial impact on the country, and on the State of Maryland. Drug and alcohol related intoxication deaths increased in 2018 for the eighth year in a row, reaching a staggering 2,406 fatalities. And while deaths related to heroin and prescription opioids have trended downward in recent years, fentanyl-related deaths have continued to rise. With the constant year to year increase in these numbers, it's critical to remember that in 2012, there were only 29 deaths from fentanyl, while 2018 saw 1,888 such deaths, more than 65 times the 2012 number. With these historically high rates of overdose and death, not to mention the collateral consequences that attach to drug-related incarceration, our state faces a public health crisis of historic proportions. Countering it and preventing needless deaths requires an innovative approach.

The opioid crisis has also contributed to an increase in human trafficking, given that opioid use is both a common predictor of, and a reaction to, this horrific crime. Many trafficking survivors report self-medicating to cope with past trauma and were trafficked as a direct result of their addiction, while those who have survived a trafficking experience often begin using substances as a means to cope with what has happened to them. Each of these populations are put at heightened risk for re-exploitation or an initial trafficking experience because they are simply looking for a safe place to use where they do not have to rely on a potential trafficker for this assistance.

House Bill 396 would reduce this potential harm by creating safe spaces for those struggling with opioid addiction. By providing safe injection sites, sterile needles, along with first aid and other services, this bill will improve the health outcomes of trafficking survivors and will reduce the trafficking risk that those without those experiences will face. For these reasons, the Human Trafficking Prevention Project at the University of Baltimore School of Law supports House Bill 396. We respectfully urge a favorable report.